



Greatest Cyclist of All Time (and a Hundred of His Fans) Take In Central Park Loop

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On Saturday morning, in the two hours between the downpour and the deluge, a band of about a hundred ridiculously merry Belgians stormed Central Park with their national hero. In their midst was Eddy Merckx, 64, the guy who Lance Armstrong calls "the greatest cyclist of all time" — he was the second rider ever to win the Tour de France five times, last in 1974 — looking incredibly nondescript in a black Nike tracksuit and the same borrowed lime-green helmet as 90 percent of the group.

Anyone who donated \$100 to Children's Lightning Wheels, a New Jersey-based nonprofit that helps athletes with disabilities, got to ride with the cycling legend, who had come to town to be honored at Saturday night's gala for the Belgian-American Chamber of Commerce, also the ride's organizer. Merckx hadn't bothered to bring his own bike ("Why would I bring it here?" he said, "I want to ride a normal city bike"), so he ended up with a rental, a large, heavy cruiser with a giant cushy seat and upright handlebars. The many riders who'd shown up with clipless pedals and head-to-toe spandex seemed a little disappointed. "I thought at least he'd be on an Eddy Merckx bike, or wearing a team jersey," one whispered.

The cheerful and chatty Merckx also didn't seem too keen on actually leading the trip. As guides from Central Park Bike Tours shouted for the group to walk their bikes on the sidewalk, Merckx jumped up onto his left pedal and weaved through the crowd, prompting most of his fellow riders to do the same, much to the guides' exasperation. Once inside the park, the unruly bunch, which included everyone from hard-core cyclists to kids on mountain bikes and one helmet-less woman riding sidesaddle while carrying what appeared to be a cello, spread out everywhere, frightening horse carriages filled with Japanese tourists (who promptly took out their iPhones and started taping the spectacle), and inspiring more than a few angry joggers to scream out, "You know, there are LANES here!"

Merckx, meanwhile, had grabbed on to one of the several pedicabs along for the ride, and was giving what seemed to be a very relaxed and charming interview in French for Belgian TV. As the pedicab with Merckx in tow hit a hill and got swallowed by eager riders, a game of "Find Eddy" began as the pack surged ahead, then slowed down again, trying to figure out which guy in a sea of identical green helmets was supposed to be their leader. Eventually Merckx ditched the pedicab, flashed a big grin, and raced to the front, triggering another surge that split the group in half.

The tour paused to regroup by the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis Reservoir, and Merckx dutifully stood near the front and pretended to listen to the guides. (As he'd explained earlier, "my wife is a much better tourist than me." An older gentleman decked out entirely in Eddy Merckx paraphernalia stood next to him and gave him a nod of acknowledgment. Merckx grinned back, then silently bent down and fixed the man's front brake.

A few minutes later, they were off again, only to make a sudden sharp turn for a break at the Waffles & Dinges truck, the 2009 Vendy Award-winning dessert truck of which the BACC is very proud. Sensing an opportunity, the riders engulfed Merckx, offering up their jerseys, hats, and helmets to be autographed. In a sad moment, the man nicknamed "the Cannibal" — for his voracious appetite for victories — declined a waffle, patting his stomach. "I had breakfast this morning, and I'm always too much weight," he explained. (Merckx famously went through a period of eating his feelings when he retired from cycling, though he seemed quite fit today). Still, after about fifteen minutes of waffling, Merckx did jump into the W&D truck for a photo op, and pretended to eat a waffle, though he never let it touch his lips. A bicycling fan who just happened to be passing by with his wife and kids lost his New York cool and accosted Merckx for a photo. "Ugh, what is Dad doing!" said one kid, rolling his eyes. "Embarrassing himself in front of some celebrity we don't know," the mom replied.

Shortly after that, the tour was over, back at SBR Multisports, the fancy Belgian-owned bicycle shop where the ride had begun. "It was good, huh? It was fun!" said Merckx as he dismounted, brushing off our claims that the mix of experienced riders and total amateurs making sudden turns and almost hitting joggers had been a bit nerve-wracking. "No, riding in the Peloton is more frightening than riding in the park. These are people who love cycling. Love it!" Anyway, these days, Merckx doesn't care too much about riding fast. "Now I ride approximately 6 or 7 thousand kilometers a year, not 35 thousand like when I was professional," he said. "I ride for fun."

Merckx does, however, still follow cycling, and is tight enough with Armstrong to have asked the BACC if they wanted Merckx to get him to come on the ride (the BACC declined because they didn't think they'd be able to handle the media circus). But Merckx is far from an Armstrong loyalist. He's hinted that Armstrong's surpassing of his record for Tour de France wins has a lot to do with Armstrong's singular focus on the Tour, rather than trying to win every race as Merckx did. And as for Armstrong's continued strong performance at age 37, Merckx, who like most of the previous great cyclists hit a wall around age 32, explained, "he stopped a few years because he had cancer, and then three years [when he retired] he wasn't riding, so if you take the years that he was professional, it's not like he was twenty years professional."

Merckx said he's pulling for Armstrong to win the Tour next time, "but it's not so easy now if you're riding with riders who are 25 or 26, eh?" Anyway, Merckx, who has said Armstrong isn't aggressive enough, likes the brash style of this year's winner, Alberto Contador. "I don't think [Contador] is arrogant," he said. "He wants to win the Tour. They both wanted to win the Tour, and he was the leader. He won because he had a lot of ambition. I think he's a very complete rider. I like Lance, but I think the best rider won the Tour de France this year."

As if on cue, the rain started up again, and Merckx headed back to his hotel for a shower, then a shopping trip to Macy's, since in addition to his bike, he'd also managed to leave his tuxedo for the gala at home. (He ended up with one from Rothman's.) But, just before he left, he assured us that he had merely postponed his participation in the day's most Belgian of activities. "Around four o'clock," he said, "I think I *will* have some waffles."

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